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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 005143

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PBTS PTER CO VE EU

SUBJECT: KIDNAPPED EU EMPLOYEE NOW FREE

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood; reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: European Union (EU) Delegation employee Carlos Ayala reportedly escaped from captivity on May 23, crossed the border into Venezuela, and made contact with officials there. The next day, EU Delegation Chief in Bogota, Adrianus Koetsenruijter, fielded questions from local and international press about the crime. He said the matter was under investigation and played down the likelihood of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) involvement, suggesting that criminal elements could also have been responsible. On May 26, Catholic Church negotiator Father Dario Echeverri (strictly protect) told polcouns that he had been in touch with a FARC 10th Front senior commander on behalf of the EU who demanded a ten million Euro ransom. Koetsenruijter confirmed to the press the EU neither negotiated nor paid ransom for Ayala's release. Yet, Ayala's unusual escape after a month in captivity raises questions. End summary.

¶2. (U) EU employee and Spanish national Carlos Ayala was allegedly kidnapped on April 15 and held for six weeks before he claims to have escaped and fled into Venezuela. European Union, Colombian, and Venezuelan officials have revealed little about the crime, other than the dates and the existence of an ongoing investigation. EU Ambassador Adrianus Koetsenruijter told the press on May 24 that he had spoken to Ayala and reported he was doing well and cooperating with authorities about his captivity.

¶3. (U) According to Koetsenruijter, Ayala was taken hostage while in Cucuta on personal business. On May 24 after his escape, he flew from Caracas to Brussels to debrief the EU. He plans to travel to Spain to reunite with family and receive medical attention in the next few days. Koetsenruijter confirmed that Ayala would return to Colombia after he recovers.

¶4. (U) The press asked Koetsenruijter repeatedly whether the FARC was involved in the kidnapping. He claimed no information about that and speculated it could have been criminals unrelated to the FARC. "Whoever they are, they are very unprofessional," he said. Koetsenruijter did admit, however, that the EU had been in contact with the FARC through a third party intermediary regarding Ayala's whereabouts. He strongly denied that the EU had paid the kidnappers or negotiated with them directly to secure Ayala's release.

¶5. (C) The third party intermediary turned out to be the Catholic Church. On May 26 in a meeting on a separate matter, Secretary General of the National Conciliation Committee Father Dario Echeverri told polcouns that he had contacted a FARC 10th Front Commander named "Camilo" in early May to negotiate Ayala's release. Camilo demanded ten million Euros for Ayala and was unwilling to discuss other, non-monetary exchanges. Echeverri advised Camilo that the EU could not pay a ransom and said he had no further discussions with the FARC on the matter.

¶6. (C) Comment: At the time of the abduction, there was considerable speculation by the press and the EU that the FARC was responsible. Koetsenruijter's public comments that he had no knowledge about FARC involvement in the kidnapping raises questions about Ayala's unusual escape and the EU's denial of a ransom payment. Escape from FARC kidnappers is extremely rare.

WOOD